ACCESS

Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, & Students Statewide

DISTANCE LEARNING

A Plan For Continued Excellence

2011-2016

Task Force on Distance and Blended Learning ~ January 2011

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ACCESS: A DISTANCE AND BLENDED LEARNING MODEL FOR ALABAMA 2011-2016
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Alabama ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide) Distance Learning Initiative was launched November 1, 2004, with initial funding of $10.3 million starting October 1, 2005. The distance and blended learning initiative was the culmination of research and planning by the Task Force on Distance Learning. In Year One, the central vision of the Task Force was to provide equal access to high-quality instruction to improve student achievement through distance learning opportunities. In Year Two through Year Five, the vision became reality. The ACCESS Distance Learning Initiative has become a cornerstone in providing equitable education to ALL Alabama public school students in a cost-effective model regardless of their zip codes.

This initiative is providing opportunities for students at their local community schools that would have otherwise not been possible. It has surpassed all original goals by developing a blended learning model providing resources, connectivity, and professional development, thus involving not only distance learning, but various blended learning models of delivery. This has supported the growth and excellence of Alabama teachers, expanded their reach across the state, given our schools the resources to develop and offer new communities of learning, and given our students the advantage of being prepared for college and careers. Even more opportunities are being planned for 2011-2016. As education is being redesigned across our nation, ACCESS is positioned to enable all Alabama public high schools to move to a more accessible blended learning course delivery model, providing opportunities for every student so that all Alabama's high school graduates are college- and career-ready.

The objectives and strategies for 2011-2016 have the potential to transform teaching and learning by providing high-quality learning opportunities for all students in Alabama. Providing flexible time, pace, and place instruction for all Alabama students will enable educators to customize the educational environment so every student learns in his or her own style and at his or her own pace. The objectives are divided into nine sections: Offerings, Availability and Use, Models of Instruction, Instructional Support, Student Support, Collaboration, Visibility, State Oversight, and Sustainability. The nine objectives are as follows:

Objective 1: Provide students with additional courses and electives needed to meet individual educational goals and to provide a fully rounded curriculum, including 21st Century skills accessible to all public high schools in Alabama.

Objective 2: Expand the availability and use of ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning.

Objective 3: Refine and expand the blended model of instruction to every high school with attention to the following: individual and institutional needs; flexible time, pace, and place accommodation; budget efficiencies; standards; and leveraging existing resources throughout the state.

Objective 4: Use ACCESS resources, including online professional development and best practices, to support and evaluate teachers and facilitators and to prepare them for effective, efficient facilitation of learning.

Objective 5: Provide a continuum of mentoring for students by taking advantage of the full range of stakeholders.

Objective 6: Establish collaborative relationships with two- and four-year institutions, industry and other community entities to facilitate and enhance college and career preparatory coursework.

Objective 7: Expand awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the ACCESS program and structure among all stakeholders.

Objective 8: Provide administrative oversight, management, and support through the Alabama Department of Education and Support Centers.

Objective 9: Refine a sustainability and long-term funding plan for maintenance and growth in the number of students served.

The ACCESS initiative has become a cornerstone for our efforts in Alabama to provide equity toward a quality education and reverse statistics citing Alabama among the lowest-performing states for high school and college graduates. In just six years ACCESS has reached out to serve all high schools within the state, and is now widely relied upon to provide key expanded offerings to students, teachers, and schools. Yet there is even greater promise for return on investment. Through existing infrastructure, services, and content, ACCESS is positioned to enable efficiencies within the state while at the same time dramatically broaden quality education opportunities. Proven success coupled with efficiency has never been more critical, and ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning represents enormous potential to leverage support as it contributes to the future educational agenda.

STATEMENT OF INTENT

The intent of this ACCESS (Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide) Plan 2011-2016 is to outline the objectives and strategies necessary to maintain, support, and further advance the vision of this highly successful and nationally recognized instructional program. These objectives are designed to enhance the ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning model and leverage its infrastructure and resources for future growth.

VISION

The state of Alabama will provide equal access to high-quality instruction to improve student achievement through distance and blended learning.

MISSION

The mission of the Alabama ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning model is to provide an infrastructure that delivers equitable, quality learning opportunities for all high school students.

GOAL

The goal of the Alabama ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning model is to provide equity through additional high-quality course offerings for all Alabama public high school students.

BACKGROUND AND STATUS

ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning delivers quality instruction and coursework to Alabama students by blending Web-based and interactive videoconferencing courses taught by Alabama teachers; provides technical infrastructure; provides regional support centers to hire, train, and support e-teachers; and offers statewide coordination.

ACCESS is an innovative program that has redesigned the model for distance learning, tailoring online and interactive videoconferencing services to the needs of schools and individual students through a blended delivery method. ACCESS is the first statewide initiative that has focused on bringing truly equitable instructional opportunities to all Alabama public high school students, regardless of where they attend school.

This program, under the supervision of the Alabama Department of Education, has strong partnerships with the Governor's Office, the Alabama Supercomputer Authority, and local school districts that have been key to its success. In essence, ACCESS is changing the face of education in Alabama, making a positive difference in teachers, schools, and ultimately economic development for the state.

In six short years, Alabama's ACCESS Distance Learning program has grown from a vision to the reality of providing every high school student an opportunity to take a wide range of courses. A Task Force was convened in the fall of 2004 to develop a plan that was presented to the legislature in the spring of 2005. ACCESS Distance Learning was funded at $10.3 million for FY06 and is currently funded for FY11 at $19 million.

In 2003, Alabama administered only 99 Advanced Placement exams per 1,000 juniors and seniors, ranking 14th out of 16 southern states. Alabama had a high need for a remediation and supplemental resources plan to increase the high school graduation rate. Alabama also had difficulty attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers (particularly in rural, impoverished areas) and especially in the areas of foreign languages, Advanced Placement, and other electives. With the implementation of ACCESS and other state initiatives, strides have been made in each of these areas. Thus, in 2007, the Average Freshman Graduation Rate was 67%, up from 62% in 2002. Since 2004, the number of Advanced Placement test takers in Alabama public schools has almost doubled. The number of African American test takers has more than quadrupled, and the number of qualifying exam scores has more than doubled. Five times more low-income students are taking Advanced Placement exams and three times more are scoring 3 or higher.

Funds have been awarded through this program to the schools so that all Alabama public high schools now have a 21st Century distance and blended learning lab including tablet computers, videoconferencing equipment, interactive whiteboards, and other technologies (completed in the fall of 2009). Broadband connectivity (minimum of 20Mbps and recently upgraded to 50Mbps based on demand) has been funded by the program and installed in every public school system. Virtual field trips have been organized and delivered by experts such as NASA and Antarctica scientists, foreign diplomats, FBI Special Agents, and others.

Extensive outside evaluation is conducted annually by the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), and changes are made in response to this feedback. The 2009-2010 ISTE report cited the positive impact of ACCESS.: (1) Increases Graduation Rate; (2) Broadens Students' Horizons on Higher Education; (3) Prepares Students for College and the World of Work; (4) Enhances Students' Attitudes Toward Learning; and (5) Gives Students a "Window on the World." One principal observed, "We decreased our dropout rate by 16% in five years. We went from last to first in test scores in several areas, thanks to ACCESS." Another principal said, "ACCESS brings the world of education to the local level." One principal summarizes, "ACCESS is taking all of us (in Alabama) into the 21st Century." The report states, "though the primary goal of the ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning Initiative is increased access to high-quality educational opportunities for all Alabama students, program personnel continue to hear anecdotal observations that these opportunities are having pervasive impact on educational reform efforts throughout the state."

The program is currently offering 115 unique courses, including 13 Advanced Placement courses. In FY2010 alone, ACCESS provided 29,415 student enrollments in courses needed by students to meet graduation requirements and 11,746 additional enrollments in non-credit remediation modules for the Alabama High School Graduation Exam and Career Forward. In the area of foreign languages, ACCESS has delivered more than 9,981 enrollments in five different foreign languages including French, German, Latin, Spanish, and Mandarin Chinese. Over 659 teacher units have delivered courses for FY2010. Now, students can be taught by certified, highly qualified Alabama teachers, regardless of where they live. A breakdown by year is as follows:

Year	Grants to Pilot Schools	Credit Enrollments	Non-Credit Enrollments	Teachers	Total Courses
FY06	44	4,382	704	103	59
FY07	26	9,508	4,108	316	77
FY08	100	22,264	13,592	362	115
FY09	190	26,197	6,059	560	107
FY10		29,415	11,746	659	115

Rigorous, high-quality, Web-based, and Interactive Videoconferencing (VCI) courses are aligned with Alabama standards. These courses include over 65 Web-based courses with additional courses under development, as well as various VCI courses as determined by the schools offering the courses. Dual enrollment/dual credit courses are being delivered via the ACCESS infrastructure. In addition, five remediation modules for the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) and Advanced Placement Exam Reviews in ten content areas are offered for all students throughout the state. Course development and upgrade are continuous processes that include a team of course designers and content experts. All courses undergo an alignment and approval process by additional content experts including experienced ACCESS teachers.

Instructional and technical support is provided by three regional support centers: Troy University ACCESS Support Center; The University of Alabama ACCESS Support Center; and Madison City Schools ACCESS Support Center, as well as the Alabama Department of Education staff. Statewide technical infrastructure has been established that includes 21st Century ACCESS classrooms in all Alabama public high schools through awarding of technology grants. The three regional support centers provide a level of support unique to the ACCESS program. Located at Troy University, The University of Alabama, and Madison City Schools, the ACCESS Support Centers train, hire, mentor, and supervise ACCESS teachers. The support centers are a vital link in program management in that they provide continuous assistance, communication, and training to counselors, principals, teachers, facilitators, and students in the learning management system, the registration portal, policies, and procedures. This regional model of support has enhanced the rapid growth and implementation of the ACCESS program.

Network connectivity serving the ACCESS Distance Learning program is provided by the Alabama Supercomputer Authority (ASA) through its statewide education network, the Alabama Research and Education Network (AREN). ASA provides the level of broadband connectivity required by ACCESS schools to successfully participate in VCI and Web-based courses. Initially, ASA provided 10Mbps of broadband connectivity to all school systems. Subsequently, broadband connectivity upgrades have been installed, first to 20Mbps and later to 50Mbps for school systems based on usage demands as monitored by ASA's Network Operations Center. Broadband connectivity is provided to ACCESS schools as needed depending on the school system's connectivity infrastructure choice. In addition, ASA provides broadband connectivity to the three ACCESS Regional Support Centers and to the Alabama Department of Education to enable effective program administration and training. Alabama's colleges and universities are also served statewide through the AREN infrastructure. A key benefit of the AREN infrastructure is the ability to deliver all ACCESS IP traffic over a managed network with network "quality of service" guarantees. This means that VCI traffic that is sensitive to "on time delivery" is guaranteed to be of maximum quality through network engineering and management services provided by ASA. Additionally, ASA makes available the services of a VCI bridge to all ACCESS schools for VCI sessions requiring a number of connections that exceed the capacity of the school's local VCI equipment. This has proven to be especially important for virtual field trips such as the UAB Antarctica event, which needed to connect 20 schools. AREN also provides its client base access to national research networks such as Internet2 (I2) and National LambdaRail (NLR).

ACCESS onsite and online professional development for teachers, facilitators, counselors, and principals follows the guidelines set forth by the State Virtual School Support component of SREB's and iNACOL's Guidelines for Professional Development of Online Teachers. Learning activities are currently implemented that support the standards and their associated indicators in SREB's and iNACOL's Standards for Quality Online Teaching. We have developed a four-step plan that consists of: (1) three-day face-to-face pre-service training with experienced teachers who desire to become ACCESS teachers; (2) peer Leader-to-Protégé training during the first and second terms of novice teacher course assignment; (3) an ongoing Professional Development Plan, with training provided by the ACCESS SDE staff that requires teachers to complete six hours the first year and two hours each year after of online ongoing distance and blended learning training covering 20–25 topics; and (4) "anytime training" offered through Connecting ACCESS Staff and Teachers, the Learning Management System course, providing tutorials, discussion board, news and announcements, etc., to make available immediate instruction, help, and resources. To meet the plan requirement for the calendar year 2010, the following professional development activity hours have been offered: (1) collectively, the support centers offered 558 hours of face-to-face training to ACCESS stakeholders including teachers, facilitators, principals, and counselors from school districts across the state; (2) support centers also offered 12 hours

of online professional development to the same stakeholders; and (3) in 2010, the ACCESS staff at the Alabama Department of Education offered 250 hours of online training and 11 hours of conference training at the Alabama Educational Technology Conference in June.

A new student registration system has recently been implemented that is integrated with the state student information system and the ACCESS learning management system. The State Department staff and three support centers offer professional development and extensive helpdesk support to schools and teachers in the registration and grade-awarding process. During the past five years, policy manuals have been developed to support the needs of the students, teachers, facilitators, and administrators. Each year these policies are reviewed to allow flexibility at the schools to meet the needs of each student while ensuring quality.

From the beginning in 2005, ACCESS has developed a blended model of instructional delivery using Web-based course content, Web conferencing software, and VCI equipment. Currently, new models of blended instruction are being adopted as Alabama teachers are using the ACCESS online resources and content in their face-to-face classes. Alabama's first statewide Distance Learning Week was initiated in 2010 with a variety of virtual field trips.

The blended approach to instructional delivery is now being implemented in different models in Alabama, such as the blended model of delivery being piloted by Hoover High School. Currently, seniors at Hoover High School have the option of taking 12th Grade English and/or 12th Grade Economics and U.S. Government through a blended class where they meet face to face with their teacher once per week and complete assignments and other discussions online. Validity for summative and performance assessments is maintained. This model lessens the physical demands on the high school building in terms of classrooms and space, and strict student eligibility guidelines are adhered to. The pilot prepares students for online college learning and creates time for students to enroll in college coursework and/or work part-time while enrolled. The pilot phase is limited to 120 students; however, student, faculty, and community interest is extremely high with anticipation of program expansion.

Despite its relatively short existence, ACCESS has already been identified as the third largest state virtual school in the country in the *2010 Keeping Pace with K-12 Online Learning*. The program has received national and international attention through a number of articles in major professional journals that have referred to it as a catalyst for progress in education and a trailblazer in distance learning. *The Economist* said, "ACCESS is leveling the playing field." Film crews and reporters from national FoxNews and CNN have visited Alabama to interview and film ACCESS leaders, teachers, and students. Both networks have aired segments featuring the positive work Alabama is doing in providing equitable education to all students through distance learning. ACCESS sites have also been toured by representatives from other countries who have learned of the program's success. Articles

have been written in *eSchool News, T. H. E. Journal, Converge, Principal Leadership, Internet and Higher Education*, and numerous newspapers. Books such as ISTE's *Technology Facilitation and Leadership Standards* and *Evaluating Online Learning Challenges and Strategies for Success* have featured sections on ACCESS Distance Learning. A detailed bibliography is included.

OBJECTIVES FOR 2011-2016

OFFERINGS

Objective 1: Provide students with additional courses and electives needed to meet individual educational goals and to provide a fully rounded curriculum, including 21st Century skills accessible to all public high schools in Alabama.

- Provide access to additional course offerings including, but not limited to, advanced diploma, dual credit, Advanced Placement, and International Baccalaureate courses.
- Provide opportunities at earlier grade levels to prepare students to take advanced academic courses.
- Provide access to credit recovery and remediation courses.
- Provide access to additional supplemental resources including virtual field trip opportunities.
- Provide a comprehensive learning objects repository and create an incentive program for the development and sharing of model courses and modules.

AVAILABILITY AND USE

Objective 2: Expand the availability and use of ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning.

- Develop understanding of the essential nature of the ACCESS program by all school instructional leaders.
- Expand the extent of use of ACCESS in every public high school with a goal of giving every high school student the opportunity to participate in an ACCESS learning experience.
- Develop processes for non-traditional students to enroll and participate in ACCESS courses through their local public school.
- Develop procedures to implement annual VCI scheduling in early spring.
- Develop additional electives including fine arts, career technical, computing, and technology.
- Make multimedia and technology tools to enhance instruction available to all teachers.
- Provide ACCESS equipment grants to career tech centers as funding permits.
- Develop experiences for middle school students through a developmental/incremental approach that will prepare them for fully independent online/distance/blended learning courses as funding permits.

MODELS OF INSTRUCTION

Objective 3: Refine and expand the blended model of instruction to every high school with attention to the following: individual and institutional needs; flexible time, pace, and place accommodation; budget efficiencies; standards; and leveraging existing resources throughout the state.

- Develop ways and provide support for ACCESS teachers to use course content in their face-to-face (F2F) classes using a blended course model.
- Develop ways and provide support for schools to offer ACCESS courses with flexible time, pace, and place instruction.
- Develop ways and provide support for all high school teachers to incorporate ACCESS technologies and resources in F2F classroom teaching strategies using a blended course model.
- Develop and refine course delivery to follow Alabama and SREB standards for distance and blended learning pedagogy addressing the following: student learning styles, student-centered instruction, outcomes-based learning, evaluation/assessment methods, and the use of rich media.
- Develop strategies strengthening student-teacher relationships including an incentive program to encourage periodic teacher visits, increased live interaction with online students, and other F2F encounters during online experiences.
- Support success of all students by establishing rewards for self-discipline in keeping pace, meeting deadlines, and mastering course content.
- Reflect emerging technologies while utilizing existing resources to the best advantage.

INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT

Objective 4: Use ACCESS resources, including online professional development and best practices, to support and evaluate teachers and facilitators and to prepare them for effective, efficient facilitation of learning.

- Develop criteria and implement a system to evaluate and showcase teacher effectiveness.
- Measure teacher and facilitator effectiveness using performance metrics measuring student participation, grades, and course completion rates.
- Document best practices on all levels, sharing examples through a repository and using them for training purposes.
- Record examples of exemplary teaching to document best practices for future professional development use and parent education. Curate this repository.
- Develop standardized criteria for selection of teacher candidates for a Mentoring Master Teacher program.
- Develop a uniform monitoring system through support centers that ensures the implementation of best practice/pedagogy standards among ACCESS teachers and mentors (Master Teachers).
- Increase options for teacher recruitment, addressing policies regarding teacher certification requirements for ACCESS offerings.

STUDENT SUPPORT

Objective 5: Provide a continuum of mentoring for students taking advantage of the full range of stakeholders.

- Provide student academic and career mentoring across grade levels and in a manner not limited to ACCESS, engaging teachers, facilitators, administrators, parents, and community stakeholders.
- Develop statewide orientation software to assess and/or remediate technology skills for students enrolled in, or planning to enroll in, distance and blended learning courses.
- Provide programs in Web-based format, accessible at any time, for assessing student strengths/weaknesses, including remediation as needed.

COLLABORATION

Objective 6: Establish collaborative relationships with two- and four-year institutions, industry, and other community entities to facilitate and enhance college and career preparatory coursework.

- Develop and communicate policies to support sharing of resources between postsecondary institutions and ACCESS, including, but not limited, to Dual Enrollment.
- Develop strategies and programs to prepare students for International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement courses and exams.
- Utilize the higher education body of knowledge and experts for technology-based offerings to enhance teaching preparation and provide clinical experiences and internships.
- Investigate shared funding models with higher education and pursue pre-service grants to strengthen the ACCESS financial structure.
- Develop strategies to encourage involvement of business, industry, and other community partners to enhance career tech opportunities at the secondary level.

VISIBILITY

Objective 7: Expand awareness, understanding, and appreciation of the ACCESS program and structure among all stakeholders.

- Promote ACCESS through superintendents' meetings, principals' meetings, PTO meetings, Open House, etc., to mobilize stakeholders to actively advocate strengthening high school curriculum through ACCESS.
- Utilize public media to promote ACCESS by developing promotional strategies for schools to use, including parent meetings regarding ACCESS policies, expectations, and ways to support students.
- Provide demonstration courses for parents and allow parental access to student progress through communication with designated school personnel.
- Advocate legislative awareness of the ACCESS program.

STATE OVERSIGHT

Objective 8: Provide administrative oversight, management, and support through the Alabama Department of Education and Support Centers.

- Continue to implement management structure, with particular emphasis on financial oversight and program accountability, to ensure budgets are developed and executed with efficiency according to the ACCESS Distance and Blended Learning Plan.
- Utilize outside evaluation to periodically assess strengths and weaknesses of the program and use them as the basis for appropriate adjustments to the annual implementation of the program.
- Promote key priorities of ACCESS to maintain program quality, plan for growth, respond to changing demands, and encourage innovative delivery strategies.
- Continue the evaluation process for Support Centers that utilizes the identified standards of excellence as benchmarks. The process will include participation and feedback from all stakeholders annually.
- Promote collaboration among Support Centers to identify and assure standards of excellence related to organization, responsibilities, expectations, evaluation, and resources.
- Continue to utilize the Alabama Research and Education Network (AREN) for quality of service delivery of Web based, VCI, and blended distance learning courses. Expand AREN to meet increased ACCESS bandwidth requirements as funding permits.

SUSTAINABILITY

Objective 9: Refine a sustainability and long-term funding plan for maintenance and growth in the number of students served.

- Determine growth by need and capacity and request budget accordingly.
- Assess key priorities and budget available funds accordingly with meeting students' needs as first priority.
- Project teacher work force required to provide quality instruction for student population.
- Consider how the limitations of existing technology in schools will affect and possibly restrict program growth.
- Maintain a comprehensive plan for infrastructure growth for Web based, VCI, and blended delivery of courses involving major stakeholders, including, but not limited to, the Alabama Department of Education, Alabama Supercomputer Authority, and local school system technology coordinators.
- Evaluate current Support Center infrastructure to determine whether it will meet anticipated growth and demand.
- Maintain/upgrade existing ACCESS infrastructure based on prior effective use/age and implement "use or lose" policy for schools with ACCESS equipment to encourage and reward system participation.
- Grow infrastructure to support blended model of online and F2F instruction.

BUDGET

From the beginning, the Task Force felt that it was very important to support schools in overcoming any barriers they might encounter in offering distance and blended learning courses. Funds are allocated for equipment, connectivity, support, course management and development, and teacher training and support. No funds (FTEs) have been taken away from the local schools because of their participation in ACCESS. Thus, true equity can be provided where even the highest poverty level schools can afford to use ACCESS. The purpose of ACCESS is to fill the gaps in all schools where teachers are not available and resources are limited for additional courses in individual schools and to extend the reach of effective teachers.

For long-term budgeting, all course materials are either purchased with a perpetual license or developed by our team of developers. This allows for continued growth at a much lower cost because a seat cost is not being paid to content providers as is the case with the majority of other state virtual schools. This cost model also allows for providing high quality digital content in a secure learning system for blended instruction throughout Alabama.

CONCLUSION

The ACCESS initiative has become a cornerstone for Alabama's efforts in providing students in Grades 8 through 12 with equitable high-quality education, and has served as a catalyst to reverse statistics citing Alabama among the lowest-performing states for high school and college graduates. In just six years ACCESS has reached out to serve all high schools within the state, and is now widely relied upon to provide key expanded offerings to students, teachers and schools. Yet, there is even greater promise for return on investment. Through existing infrastructure and services and content, ACCESS is positioned to enable efficiencies within the state while at the same time dramatically broaden quality education opportunities. As education is being redesigned across our nation, ACCESS is positioned to enable all Alabama public high schools to move to a blended learning course delivery model, providing opportunities for every student so that all of Alabama's students are college- and career-ready when they graduate from high school. Proven success coupled with efficiency has never been more critical, and ACCESS represents enormous potential to leverage support as it contributes to future educational agenda.

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